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ABSTRACT

A study investigated how a second language (L2) learner's writing skills develop in a second-language context. The three research questions addressed the effect of: (1) first-language (L1) literacy skills, (2) L2 proficiency, and (3) the instructional context on L2 writing. Subjects were 70 university French students. Data were drawn from 300 writing protocols, or 3-5 samples from each subject. The writing samples were analyzed quantitatively for 6 variables: overall quality; number of T-units; mean length of T-unit; number of error-free T-units; mean length of error-free T-units; and number of words. Additional qualitative analysis consisted of: (1) investigation of the writing processes of 7 case-study subjects, which included observation, retrospective interviews, and think-aloud writing protocols in French and English; (2) survey of teacher perceptions of writing in a foreign language context, through observation and interviews; and (3) discourse analysis of the writing samples. It is concluded that L2 learners do rely on L1 literacy skills for L2 writing, and acknowledge the constraints of limited vocabulary and insufficient grammatical knowledge in producing L2 writing. In addition, L2 language proficiency, including oral skills, appears to affect L2 writing skills. A number of variables are seen as explaining variability in student performance. (MSE)

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FROM FIRST LANGUAGE LITERACY TO SECOND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TO SECOND LANGUAGE LITERACY: THE ACT OF WRITING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CONTEXT

Paper presented at the AERA Convention in Atlanta, Georgia on Wednesday, April 14, 1993

by

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INTRODUCTION: For the past 15 years, communicative language teaching with its emphasis on oral skills has been the dominant focus in the second language classroom. The primacy of speaking and listening skills over reading and writing has been evident especially at the beginning levels of language instruction. Recently, however, concern over the neglect of literacy skills has led to a more sophisticated notion of communication rooted in content-based instruction that includes proficiency in all four skills (Mohan, 1986). The result of this shift in curricular emphasis and instructional practice is that the skill of writing is beginning to assume its rightful place alongside the other skills. This reappraisal of the role of writing in the communicative classroom necessitated a study that included not only the written products and the composing processes of the learners but an examination of the instructional context as well.

The research base in second language writing has increased dramatically in the last decade. Numerous English as a Second Language (ESL) case studies have described the effect of second language (L2) proficiency on writing skills. Given the instructional practice in the L2 classroom of having students speak before they write, it is surprising to find that few studies (Brooks, 1985; Cumming, 1989) consider the oral skills of their subjects as a starting point. Although a number of case studies have addressed the transfer of first language (L1) writing skills (Arndt, 1987; Friedlander, 1990; Galvan, 1985; Gaskill, 1986; Lay, 1982; Martin-Betancourt, 1986), Vann's study (1979) of English as

a Foreign Language (EFL) writers stands alone in the investigation of oral and written syntactic relationships. To date no study has explored the influence of both first language literacy and second language proficiency on the development of second language writing skill.

OBJECTIVES: This study specifically addressed the following research question: How does writing develop in a foreign language context? A number of more direct questions were subsumed under this overall question:

1. What is the effect of L1 literacy skills on L2 writing?
2. What is the influence of L2 proficiency on L2 writing?
3. What is the effect of the instructional context on L2 writing?

METHODOLOGY: This study was an analysis of the writing of 70 students enrolled in the three culture sections of French 104 at The Ohio State University. The overall design for this study was dual in nature involving a quantitative analysis of the writing samples and a qualitative analysis of the writing process in a foreign language context. (See Figure 1). The objective of the quantitative analysis was to answer the questions regarding the influence of both L1 literacy skills and L2 proficiency on L2 writing, and to see if there were any differences among the three classes. The aim of the qualitative analysis was to shed additional light on these questions as well as examine the nature

of the instructional context.

The focus of the quantitative analysis was the 300 protocols, representing from three to five writing samples from each of the subjects. Simultaneous multiple regression was used for statistical analysis. The covariate was group, a categorical measure referring to the three classes that participated in the study. There were two independent variables, both quantitative measures. The first variable was first language literacy level as measured by the mean of three self-reported scores, all based on a four point scale: (a) college grade point average, (b) overall English grade in high school, (c) overall English grade in college. The second independent variable was second language proficiency as measured by the mean of three self-reported scores, all based on a four point scale: (a) overall French grade in high school, (b) overall French grade in college, and (c) overall speaking test scores for the first three quarters of foreign language study. The researcher was able to verify the college French grades and speaking test scores for 42 of the 70 students.

For the analysis of the writing samples, there were six dependent variables: (a) holistic scores, (b) number of T-units, (c) mean length of T-units, (d) number of error-free T-units, (e) mean length of error-free T-units, and (f) number of words. The holistic scores measured the overall written quality of the writing samples. The number of T-units and error-free T-units provided indices of syntactic complexity and accuracy. The overall length of each composition was a measure of fluency.

The qualitative analysis consisted of three parts. The first part was an investigation of the writing processes of seven case study subjects identified by a purposeful sampling of the population. Data included observations, retrospective interviews, and think-aloud protocols of their writing both in French and in English. The second part was an examination of teacher perceptions of writing in a foreign language context as evidenced in observations and interviews. The third part was a discourse analysis of the written protocols.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS: There were no interactions for either Group and L1 or for Group and L2. The slopes of the three regression lines were determined to be the same. The analysis was run three times, each time pairing two of the classes. There were differences in the intercepts between Class 3 and the other two classes. Since there were no differences between the intercepts of Classes 1 and 2, that was the model selected to report the results. (See Table 1).

First Language Effect: There was no overall main effect for the L1 variable on any of the dependent variables. One explanation for this lack of significance might be the small variance in the indirect measures of writing used to generate the L1 variable.

Second Language Influence: The results of the analysis clearly show the influence of the L2 variable on second language writing. There was a main effect for second language proficiency on overall

holistic scores, number of T-units, number of error-free T-units, average length of error-free T-units, and number of words written across the five essays.

INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXT: Class differences showed up in holistic scores, number of T-units, and number of words written. Class 2 had higher holistic scores overall than Class 3, and both Classes 1 and 2 wrote more T-units and words overall than Class 3. (See Figures 2, 3, and 4).

B. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS:

First Language Effect: Given the nature of the indirect measures of writing used in the study and the subsequent lack of significance in the regression analysis, the qualitative findings helped to shed some light on the impact of the first language on second language writing. (See Figure 5). The seven case study subjects do indeed rely on their L1 literacy skills to accomplish a L2 writing task. They know how to do academic writing. They are aware of the importance of topic knowledge and its effect on the length of their composition. The more they know about a subject, the more they will write, and this carries over even into their second language writing. From the interviews with the case study subjects, it is clear that they perceive their L2 writing to be much simpler and less sophisticated than their first language writing. They acknowledge the constraints of a limited vocabulary and insufficient grammar knowledge. For most of them, writing in French is a difficult and often frustrating experience because they

do not have these problems when writing in English.

Second Language Influence: The qualitative findings lend further support to the impact of second language proficiency including oral skills on second language writing. The discourse analysis of the first essay showed that second language writers tend to incorporate certain speech patterns in their essays that give a conversational quality to their writing. From the case study analyses emerges evidence that these learners subvocalize in the second language when they are writing and that this practice appears to be facilitative. Although the students have this oral facility in the second language, they do not appear to use it to its full advantage. Instead of relying more on their phonological memory of French syntactic patterns, they revert to a word for word translation process that interrupts their fluency.

Instructional Context: From the classroom observations and the interviews with both the seven subjects and the three teachers have emerged a number of explanations for the differences among the three classes including: (a) teacher expectations, (b) differences in the instructional context such as time of day and amount of L2 interaction, (c) students' perceptions of the writing task, (d) differences in the prompts, (e) the influence of topic familiarity, and (f) student motivation.

IMPLICATIONS: A number of pedagogical implications have surfaced from this study of the development of second language literate behaviors. First, educators need to be aware of the many factors

that influence this development including the first language literacy levels of the students, their second language proficiency, and the impact of the instructional environment. Given the evidence of the similarities in composing behaviors across languages, instructors should consider the development of L2 writing skills as an extension of their students' first language literacy skills, and they should, therefore, emphasize topic development and organization.

Second, educators need to address the L2 linguistic deficiencies of their students, especially in vocabulary and grammar. Given the constraints of time and class size, teachers could implement peer editing sessions in the classroom and support the use of computerized instructional aids outside the classroom. Moreover, they need to encourage students to speak in the second language when they are writing as this appears to be advantageous in the recall of syntactic patterns.

Third, teachers need to be aware of their influence on the academic writing task. As Mohan and Lo reported in their 1985 study of Chinese students learning to write in English, students write as they are taught to write. If the instructional emphasis is on grammatical accuracy, then the students will attend to errors.

Fourth, a broader implication of this study lies in curriculum development. In viewing L2 literacy development as an extension of L1 literacy, Santos (1992) suggests that L1 and L2 writing specialists come together to coordinate writing courses and

programs. Moreover, given the extent of L2 research done in the area of composing behaviors, textbook developers need to incorporate these findings that emphasize the process as well as the product.

In addition to its effect on the applied level, this study has contributed to the building of a theory of second language writing by examining the factors that influence development. The current methodologies used in second language literacy studies are based on first language models. The present study is no exception in its examination of a foreign language context in which oral skills have been emphasized and where literate behaviors are emerging. First language literacy develops out of oral skills in children (Britton, 1970). The development of second language writing differs, however, in that adult L2 learners have in addition to their speaking skills a repertoire of literate behaviors. A third factor in this process is the influence of the instructional context. The findings from this study suggest that the act of writing in a foreign language context is a continuum from L1 literacy to L2 proficiency to L2 literacy.

Table 1

Summary Table for the Effect of L1, L2, Group 1, and Group 2 on Six Dependent Variables

Source	DF	SS	MS	F	PR F
Holistics					
L1	1	0.01	0.01	0.07	0.7945
L2	1	4.16	4.16	23.72	0.0001
G1	1	0.63	0.63	3.60	0.0627
G2	1	1.06	1.06	6.07	0.0167
T-units					
L1	1	3.08	3.08	1.29	0.2604
L2	1	25.26	25.26	10.57	0.0019
G1	1	41.88	41.88	17.53	0.0001
G2	1	21.40	21.40	8.96	0.0040
Mean T's					
L1	1	0.22	0.22	0.04	0.8437
L2	1	0.06	0.06	0.01	0.9178
G1	1	21.65	21.65	3.80	0.0558
G2	1	5.07	5.07	0.89	0.3488
EFT's					
L1	1	0.35	0.35	0.68	0.4135
L2	1	9.71	9.71	18.73	0.0001
G1	1	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.8866
G2	1	0.76	0.76	1.47	0.2307
Mean EFT's					
L1	1	8.68	8.68	0.87	0.3544
L2	1	102.66	102.66	10.30	0.0021
G1	1	29.12	29.12	2.92	0.0925
G2	1	2.44	2.44	0.24	0.6225
Words					
L1	1	465.97	465.97	1.24	0.2704
L2	1	4017.94	4017.94	10.67	0.0018
G1	1	4528.80	4528.80	12.03	0.0010
G2	1	2887.02	2887.02	7.67	0.0075

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

70 SUBJECTS

300 ESSAYS

THE ACT OF WRITING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CONTEXT

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

SEVEN CASE STUDY SUBJECTS

TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Figure 1. Overall Research Design

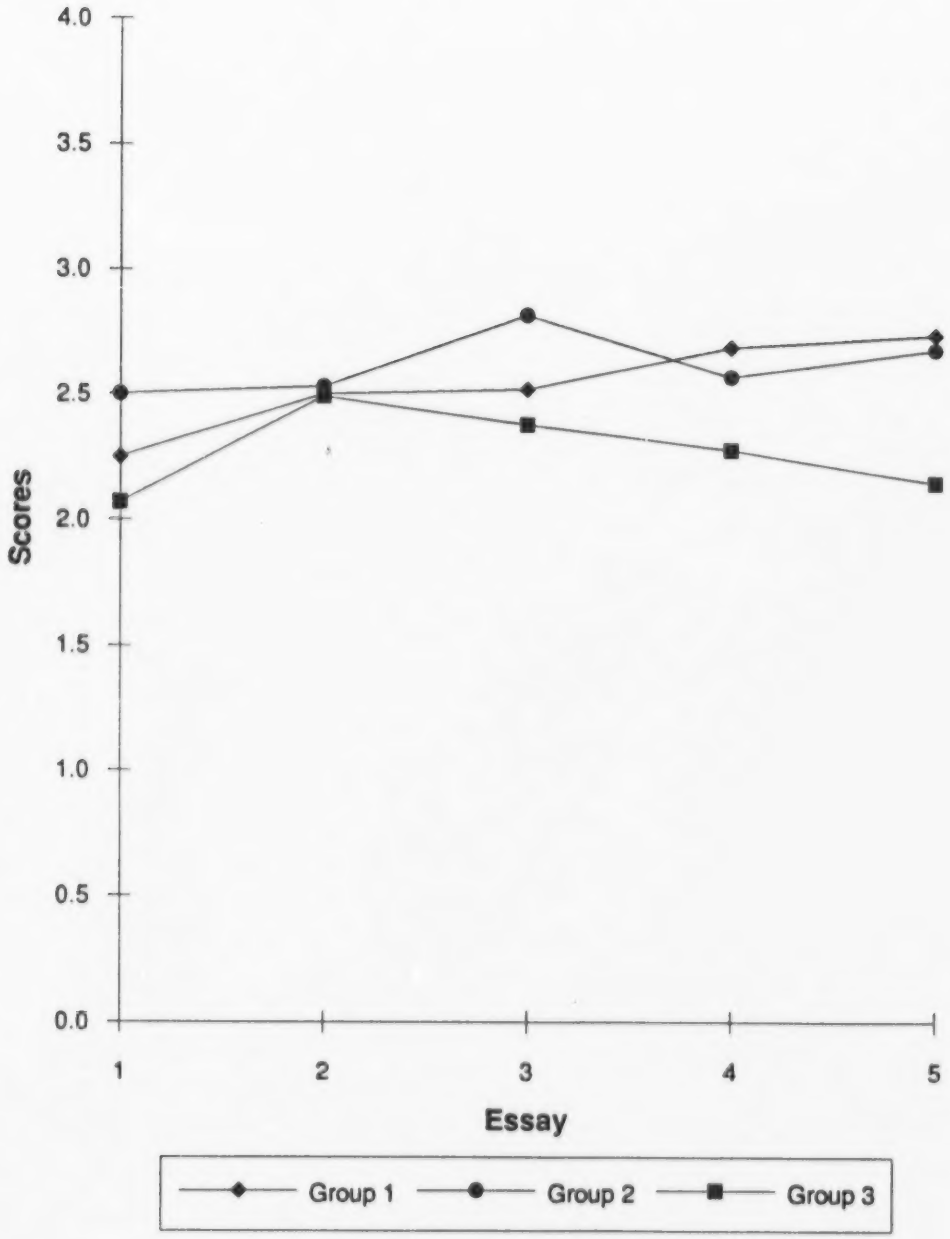

Figure 2. Holistic Scores for Three Classes by Essay

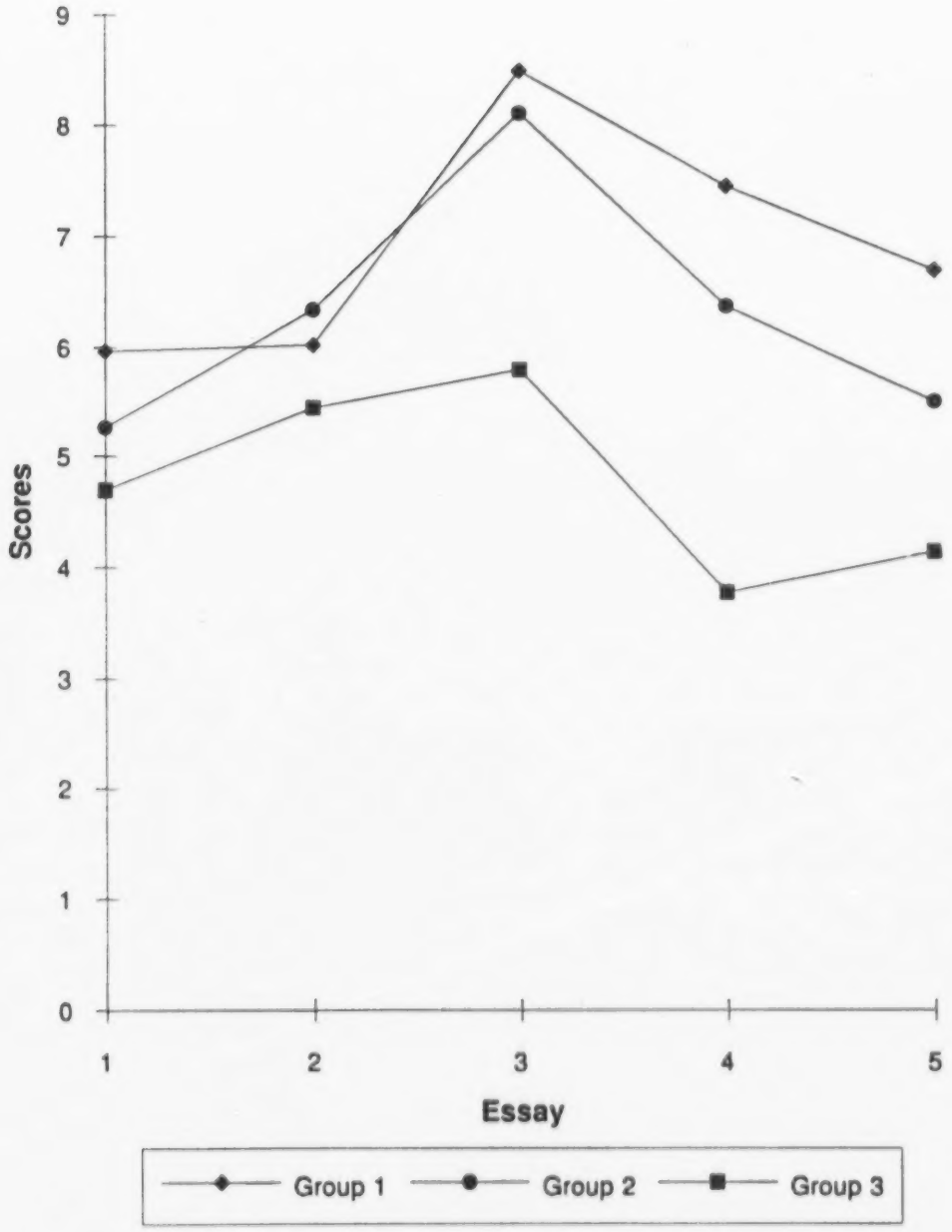

Figure 3. Number of T-units for Three Groups by Essay

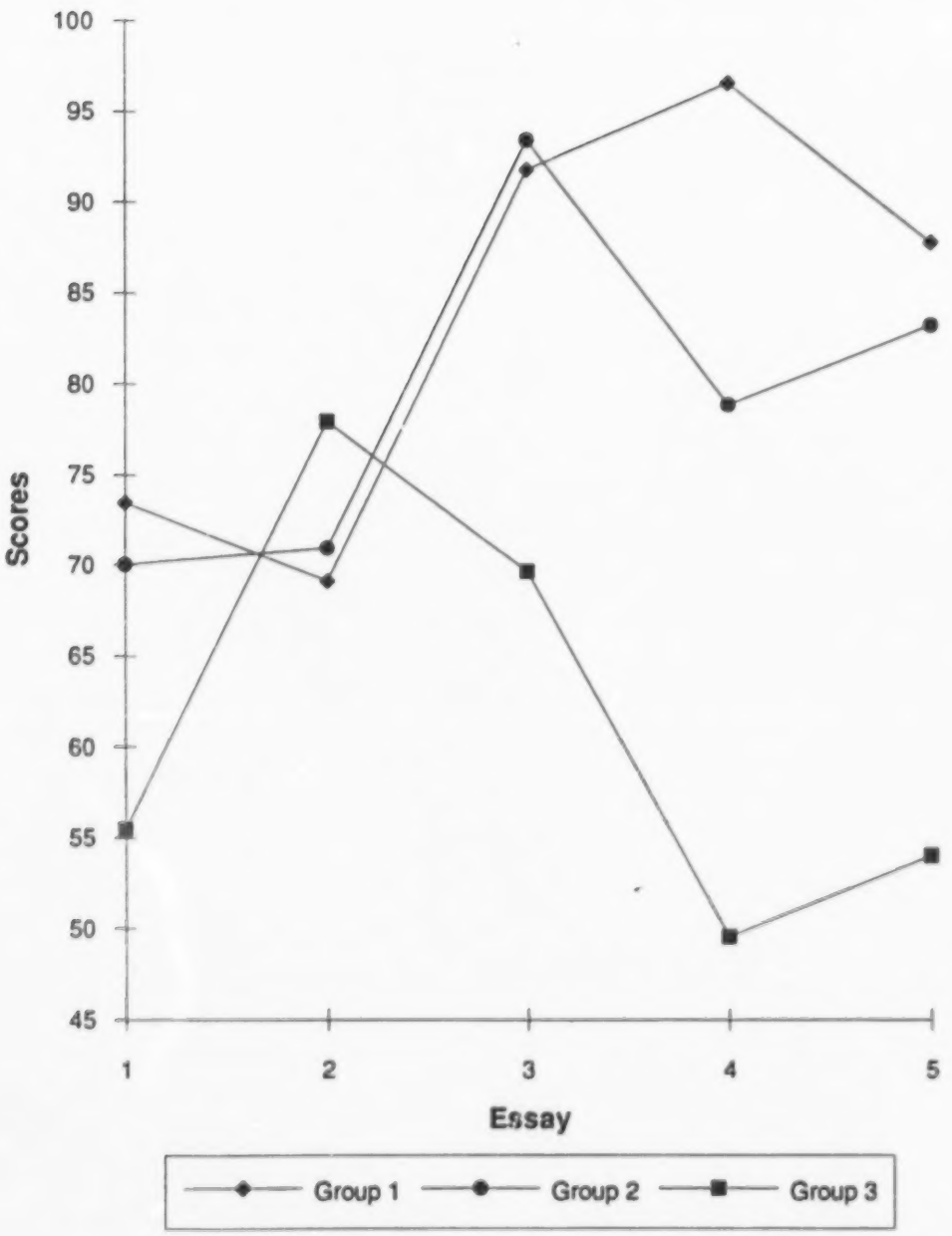

Figure 4. Number of Words for Three Groups by Essay

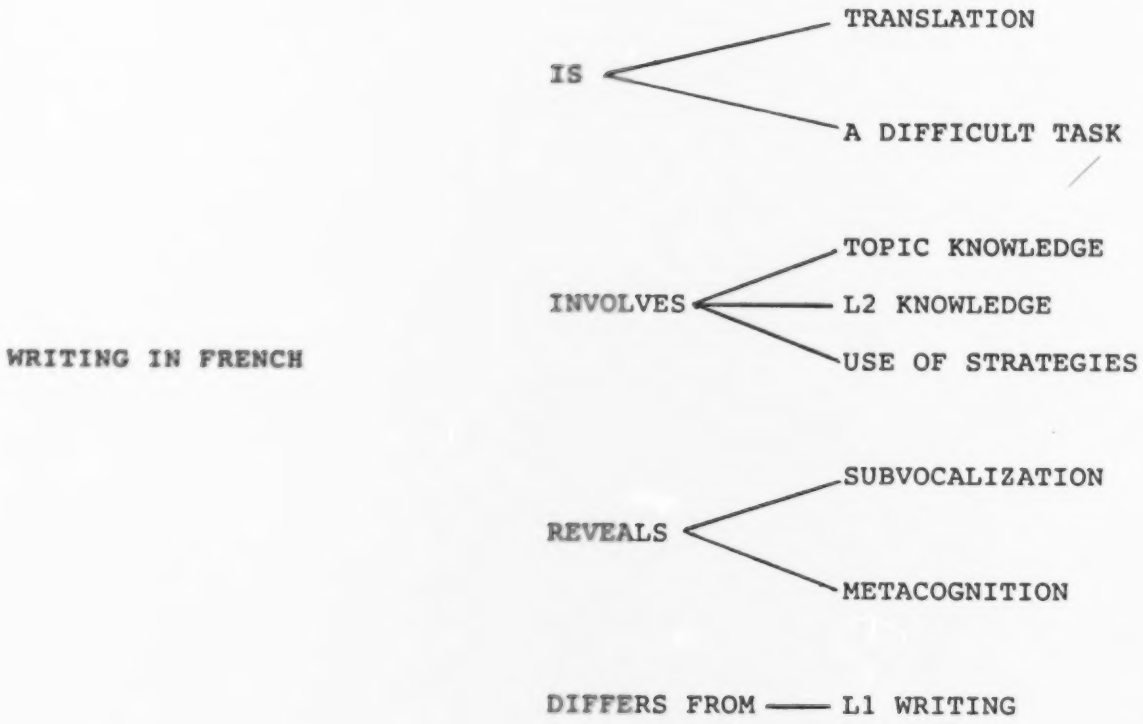

Figure 5. Taxonomy of Descriptors of the Act of Writing in a Foreign Language Context

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